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CONTINUITY AND ADAPTATION IN LEGENDS OF CAILLEACH BHÉARRA

Reference to Cailleach Bhéarra in both medieval materials and in modern scholarly surveys of the medieval Gaelic world is pervasive. She appears as an unstable and yet a pre-eminent presence whose status is attested equally in Irish and Scottish Gaelic tradition and in the modern scholarship of these traditions. Professor Mac Cana's reference to her in his survey of Celtic mythology is typical both in its emphasis and in its qualification.[1] He speaks of Cailleach Bhéarra as being 'as famous in modern Irish folklore as she evidently was in the early literary tradition'. The textual basis of her earlier fame is clearly of an implicit nature only, yet Mac Cana just as clearly accepts the ascription to her by early tradition of a cluster of roles:- a geotechtonic role in landscape formation; a status as divine ancestress with numerous progeny of tribes and people; the characteristic of being an epitome of longevity in passing repeatedly through the cycle of youth and age; and a role as sovereignty symbol in, for example, her representation in the medieval materials, under the name Buí, as the wife of Lugh, elsewhere himself the model representation of kingship. The Scottish scholar, J.G. Mackay, has referred to her as 'the most tremendous figure in Gaelic myth today',[2] while Professor Wagner, in a recent article — thinking, surely, not only of the famous ninth-century poem — calls her 'the most famous old lady in Irish literature'.[3] Ann Ross, too, has accorded her considerable prominence, not only in her book *Pagan Celtic Britain* but also in her specific publication on 'The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts'.[4]

Attempts to identify the nature and the significance Cailleach Bhéarra carries within the Gaelic world quickly lead one to the realization that we are dealing with an extremely complex figure.

1 P. MacCana, *Celtic Mythology,* Feltham, Middlesex 1983, 92-3.

2 J.G. Mackay, *More West Highland Tales,* I-II, Edinburgh 1940, Preface Vol. 1, xvii.

3 H. Wagner, 'Origins of Pagan Irish Religion', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie,* 38 (1981), 1-28.

4 Ross, Ann (1967), *Pagan Celtic Britain,* London 1967; 'The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts' in Venetia Newall, ed., *The Witch Figure,* London 1973, 139-64.

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At different stages and at different levels of Gaelic tradition the figure of Cailleach Bhéarra has been used to represent different clusterings of cultural meaning so that we are faced with a multiplicity of forms and functions of Cailleach Bhéarra that prove very difficult to distinguish and whose historical and/or functional relationship to each other continues to be obscure to a great degree. In one viewing Cailleach Bhéarra would appear to represent a version of traditions of a Mother Goddess emanating from the worlds of Indo-European and even old European cosmology. In another she appears as a representative figure of the Divine Hag of the Celtic and Early Irish worlds who has close connections with the Sovereignty Queen tradition. Yet again, Cailleach Bhéarra can be seen as a version of a supernatural female wilderness figure peripheral to and usually inimical to the human world. Indeed Cailleach Bhéarra in modern Gaelic folklore, in both Scotland and Ireland, is most frequently understood as one of a range of such wilderness figures and I am of the opinion that these owe their existence in Gaelic traditions, later and early, at least in part to the influence of Norse cosmology in its personification of the forces of wild nature. This is an aspect of Cailleach Bhéarra tradition that has not, I believe, hitherto, been generally acknowledged.

An examination of Scottish material relating to the supernatural female bearing the names Cailleach Bhéara/Bheurr reveals a multitude of association between her and the forces of wild nature, especially the storms of winter, the storm clouds and the boiling winter sea. She is also, in the Scottish material, very much the spirit of the high ground, of mountain and moor and is seen frequently to personify wildlife, for instance the life and wellbeing and fertility of the deer herd.

Norse folklore is pervaded with creatures representing the forces of wild nature and in Scottish tradition Cailleach Bheurr is frequently said to have herself originated in Norway from where she allegedly carried rocks out of which she formed the coasts and mountains of the Scottish mainland and of the Western Isles. If many of the Scottish legends of Cailleach Bheurr contain such motifs of Nordic provenance there is equal evidence of a Norse element in the make-up of other varieties of Scottish hags of the peripheral wilderness who also personify wild nature and are held

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to threaten human life. Such personages, and especially Cailleach Bheurr, are credited with the formation of various aspects of the physical landscape and are often said to reside in a cliff or a sea rock where they rule the waves of the sea. The Cailleach Bhéarrach of the Irish Beara peninsula is locally associated with a standing stone in the vicinity of Eyeries. Eyeries is a place-name that my colleague Dr. Roibeard Ó hUrdail suggests may possibly be of Scandinavian origin in being derived from the Norse *eyrr* which means 'a gravelly beach' and is found in well-known placenames of the Scottish coast, in the Isles and in Man. Oileán Buí itself, of course, named for Cailleach or Sentainne Berri one of whose earlier names was Buí, bears also the Norse-derived name 'Dursey' and there is little doubt but that the south-west Irish coast is, or was once, rich in Norse association. I mention An tOileán Tiar (Blasket) and Carraig Aonair (Fastnet) as two other major south-western locations having Norse-derived alternative names.

Cailleach Bhéarra's reputation as a figure of significance would, then, appear to span the worlds of Celtic mythology, Gaelic medieval literature and modern Irish and Scottish folklore with, in each case, a possible Norse connection. Eleanor Hull and Alexander Hagerty Krappe have both written valuable articles on aspects of Cailleach Bhéarra in later popular tradition; Hull in the English journal *Folklore*[5] and Krappe in volume one of *Études Celtique*.[6] Eleanor Hull raises the question whether the myth of Cailleach Bhéarra might not be a comparatively late one since she is, says Hull, unknown outside the Gaelic world and, within that world, gets no mention in such mainstream medieval sources as *Sanas Chormaic,* the *Cóir Anmann,* the *Dindsheannchas* or *Acallamh na Senórach.* She is mentioned, we may note, in *Aislinge Mheic Conglinne* and also in the *Expulsion of the Déssi* — the later twelfth-century version — and under her earlier name, Buí/Boí, she appears in the *Metrical Dindsheannchas.* Despite this relative dearth of mention, Hull concedes that Cailleach Bhéarra tradition, especially in its geotechtonic aspect, might well have an earlier

5 Eleanor Hull, 'Legends and Traditions of the Cailleach Bhearra or Old Woman (Hag) of Beare', *Folklore* 38 (1927), 225-54.

6 A.H. Krappe, 'La *Cailleach Bhéara.* Notes de mythologie gaelique', *Études Celtiques* 1 (1936) 292-302.

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and more distant source than the boundaries of the Gaelic world. Krappe takes that earlier, distant source for granted and sees Cailleach Bhéarra tradition as a Gaelic reflex of a theme or themes whose provenance is wider and older than the entire Celtic world:

> La Cailleach Bheara est une ancienne déesse agraire et chthonienne équivalent gaélique de la Déméter grecque, déesse de la fertilité mais aussi de la mort. S'est rattachée à elle une légende développée d'un ancien rite qui, en Phrygie, courait sur Lityerse.[7]

Hull in fact quotes in translation from the text of a modern Irish narrative — published by Douglas Hyde in *An Sgéulaidhe Gaedhalach*[8] — that seems to echo the Phrygian tale of how, in a reaping contest, Hercules eventually overthrows Lityerses, son of Midas, who in those days reigned over the corn-harvest on the banks of the Maeander.[9]

In such a context one must recall Professor Gerard Murphy's remark[10] that 'many Irish folk-tale motifs are as old as the days of primitive Indo-European unity' and the contention, on archaeological rather than on literary or linguistic grounds, by Professor Jan Filip, of a significant degree of continuity into the Celtic world from Late Stone Age times in the matter of the *Magna Mater*.[11] If early twentieth-century storytellers in the west of Ireland have as an authentic part of their traditional repertoire from medieval and earlier times an account of how a local champion overcomes the female divinity of the corn harvest in a reaping contest, then it would appear that Gaelic oral narrative tradition, in Ireland at least, was still, into our age, carrying forward an extremely ancient formualtion of that pattern of opposition between Otherworld Supreme Divinity and Semi-Divine/Semi-Human Hero whose outline in Irish mythology

7 *Ibid.*, 302.
8 D. de hÍde, *An Sgéulaidhe Gaedhealach,* Baile Átha Cliath 1933, 227-36.
9 Th. H. Gaster, *The New Golden Bough,* New York 1959, 499-500.
10 G. Murphy, review of J. Szöverffy, *Irisches Erzählgut im Abendland* in *Éigse* 9 (1961), 133-4.
11 J. Filip, *Celtic Civilization and its Heritage,* Wellingborough and Prague 1977, 172-9.

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Professor O'Rahilly tried to establish. Not only that, but Hyde's text, if it is genuine, could well supply the affirmative answer to Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's question in *The Heroic Biography of Cormac Mac Airt*[12] as to the existence of an as yet unrecognised 'Otherworld Goddess vs Hero' opposition as predicated in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations inherent in O'Rahilly's theory. Incidentally, a second source of such 'Goddess vs Male Hero' opposition is alluded to by Máire MacNeill, in *The Festival of Lughnasa,* when she speaks[13] of the shadow of a female person — sometimes called Ana/Áine, sometimes Cailleach Bhéarra — looming behind the male divinity of Crom Dubh from whom, in the Lughnasa legends, Lugh ultimately wins the harvest. Again here popular tradition would appear to be preserving the names and the older strands of meaning — as chthonic and fertility goddess — of a figure who, at the learned and aristocratic level of tradition, is long-since transformed in function to being a sovereignty queen.

At the learned, political, literary level of Irish tradition, the chief significance of the female divine in general develops away from the ancient chthonic and harvest associations and — through the figures of the goddesses of war and death — is ultimately invested in figures representing the sovereignty of the rightful ruler and the personification of the territories and even of the whole land of Ireland itself. The medieval conception of such sovereignty figures carries on down to the eighteenth-century *Aisling* genre of modern Irish poetic tradition. The tired and clichéd nature of the eighteenth-century tradition was however — as I have argued elsewhere[14] — to be radically revitalised by Brian Merriman who, by invoking in *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* the medieval form of the sovereignty myth, liberated into the modern Gaelic world the powerful, full-blooded personification of sovereignty in the guise of Aoibheall of Craig Léith.

One of the chief ways known to us in which Cailleach Bhéarra is established in medieval tradition in the ranks of the sovereignty queens is the use of her name to identify the subject of the

12. T. Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac Mac Airt,* Dublin 1977.
13. Máire Mac Neill, *The Festival of Lughnasa,* Oxford 1962, 412-3.
14. G. Ó Crualaoich, 'The Vision of Liberation in *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*' in de Brún, P. *et al.*, eds., *Folia Gadelica,* Cork 1983, 95-104.

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celebrated Old Irish 'Lament of the Old Woman of Beare'.[15] In the second quatrain of this poem the line *Is me Caillech Bérri Buí* occurs and it is a line rich in ideological import with its overtones of Christian religion, Celtic mythology and localized political topography. Buí was claimed as divine ancestress by the Corca Loigde — a leading tribe of the Érainn of West Munster — whose territory once included the whole of the Beara peninsula and the chief residence of whose over-king was at Dunboy (Dún Buíthe). Such political use of the significance of Cailleach Bhéarra in the realm of poetry is presumably paralleled by her similar utilization in prose, as, for instance, the subject of the now lost tale *Serc Caillighe Bérri do Fothad Cannaine* where, we may assume, the desire to shape political reality produces a further claiming of her as ancestress and divine legitimatrix on behalf of aspirants to political authority.

The author of the ninth-century Lament, it is agreed, proceeds to exploit ideological ambiguities in inventing the figure and name-form of the aged female who is at once the lingering representative of a profane, native eternity of earthly sovereignty *and* the Christian nun finally embracing the prospect of an eternity of the heavenly sovereignty of the male Christian god. In his 1953 edition of the Lament Gerard Murphy wrote:

> Her name which is *Sentainne Bérri* . . . has already become *Caillech Bérri. Caillech Bérri* would once have meant 'The Nun of Beare' but had doubtless at the time the poem was written already, in ordinary speech, become the equivalent of an obsolescent *Sentainne Bérri* which could mean only 'The Old Woman of Beare': *sentainne* is obsolete in Irish today and *cailleach* for long has meant, not 'nun', but 'old woman'.[16]

Sentainne Bérri then is one ancient ascription of the divine female that gives her a localized mythological and quasi-political association with south-west Ireland and in particular with the Beara peninsula at whose tip lie both Tech Duinn and Dursey Island, otherwise Oileán Buí.

15 K. Myer, 'Stories and Songs from Irish Mss.', *Otia Merseiana* 1 (1899), 119-28.
16 G. Murphy, 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare', *Proceedings Royal Irish Academy* 55 (1953), 84.

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I find it very interesting indeed that Professor Wagner, in his recent *Zeitschrift* article,[17] should identify both these earliest names for Cailleach Bhéarra, viz. Sentainne (Bérri) and Boí/Buí with derivations from the Indo-European forms **Senona* and **Bovina* meaning, respectively, 'female elder' and 'cow-like-one' — the latter being, Wagner claims, a characteristic appellation of Indo-European manifestations of the *Magna Mater*. On Professor Wagner's terms, then, both the rivers Shannon and Boyne are named ultimately for the female divine who herself begins to become known as Cailleach Bhéarra round about the late eighth or early ninth centuries when the famous Lament was composed. From my point of interest in considering prose narrative vesions of Cailleach Bhéarra legends a further remark of Gerard Murphy's in his 1953 edition is here crucial:

> The change from *Sentainne Berri* to *Caillech Berri* doubtless first occurred colloquially among the illiterate. When it had firmly established itself, the learned may have invented the legend that the Old Woman of Beare became a nun and received the *caille* or nun's veil . . . thus justifying the title *caillech*. In quatrains 11, 12 and 22 of the poem, the Old Woman of Beare is clearly looked upon as a nun.[18]

From other quatrains of the poem it is equally clear that the Old Woman of Beare has been the consort of kings and thus the embodiment of the sovereignty principle in much the same way as Gormfhlaith and Líadain embody it in the poems attributed to them. Using the traditional associations of the Cailleach or Sentainne Bérri as mother-goddess, as shaper and guardian of the land, and as sovereignty figure, the author of the Lament is able to express, to quote Professor Mac Cana,[19] 'the deep incompatibility between Christianity and the world of pagan belief' something that Mac Cana calls 'one of the great crucial themes of the Irish past'. Most commentators on the Lament see this contrast, or opposition, to be something pivotal in the poem and a major source of its imaginative tension. Such imaginative

17 *Op. cit.*
18 *Op. cit.*, 84-5.
19 *Loc. cit.*

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tension, generated between native and Christian ideology and motif, is a source of a good deal of Irish artistic output — visual as well as literary — in the medieval period. Whether this ambivalence of cosmology inherent in the Lament itself and for example, in poems such as 'Hail Brigit', attributed to Orthanach Ua Coíllámha in the early ninth century, found any similar expression then in prose tales featuring Cailleach Bhéarra in the colloquial repertoire of the bearers of popular Gaelic tradition, we can now never know in any direct way. We can, however, examine what has come down into modern times, amalgamated in complicated ways with later and with learned material, as the popular traditional repertoire of the last generations of *scéalaithe* and *seanchaithe* in the Gaelic world.

Cailleach Bhéarra is prominent in this repertoire, both in Ireland and in Scotland, and some attempt can be made to impose order on the multiplicity of significance which she seems to possess in this material. One may attempt to establish the developmental stages in the narrative and other history of the person and the legend of Cailleach Bhéarra. Or one may in synchronic or structural terms, attempt to construct a model showing the relationships to each other of the various aspects of Cailleach Bhéarra tradition. Such a structural model has been proposed by Professor Paul Friedrich of Chicago to cater for the significance and development of Aphrodite through antiquity.[20] By means of his model Friedrich is able to resolve apparently opposing aspects of the Aphrodite tradition, for instance, the sexuality and purity that are, in her texts, simultaneously affirmed. The apparent absence of any substantial early corpus of Cailleach Bhéarra myth or legend probably means that textually-based work on her earlier significance, parallel to Friedrich's on the significance of Aphrodite, is less likely of accomplishment. Nevertheless, in the case of Cailleach Bhéarra and her surrogates, we should, I believe, regard them as possessing separate — and perhaps structurally opposing — clusterings of cultural meaning in the context of the Indo-European, the Celtic and the Gaelic worlds. The early Indo-European heritage in the Cailleach Bhéarra character can be seen in the more modern material

20 P. Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, Chicago 1978.

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primarily in the Earth Mother and Fertility Goddess aspects of her figure. Similarly in relation to a more specifically Celtic heritage of significance for the Divine Hag we should highlight the primacy of the Hag of War and Death aspect, an aspect, incidentally, that also has strong overtones of the notion of a powerful sexuality. Primacy of the symbolism of the Sovereignty Goddess, the divine consort of the rightful ruler, then remains as the aspect of the tradition developed latest and at the learned and literary level only. It is this aspect which has, however, made the term Cailleach Bhéarra or a rendering of it, well-known throughout the later Gaelic world as a name for the subject of a large corpus of legend regarding various manifestations of a supernatural female ancient.

The significance of Cailleach Bhéarra in modern Irish and Scottish folklore has thus to be understood, I think, in relation to the two separate yet related levels of tradition:- the literary, learned traditions of the early middle ages in which the term Cailleach Bhéarra is established as the name of a sovereignty queen in politics, in prose and in poetry, and the common, popular, unlearned level of Gaelic traditions (concerning which there is little direct evidence until modern times) which seems to have contained a range of manifestations of an ancient female divine with the general characteristics of the Old European *Magna Mater*. Since the middle ages and due partly to the fusing of the learned with the unlearned traditions in the social upheavals of the Early Modern period, the name Cailleach Bhéarra, or a version of it, has come into widespread use throughout the Gaelic world, in Ireland and Scotland, as a name of these *Magna Mater*-type female supernaturals in materials placing a marked emphasis on the Terrible Mother, the wilderness-personifying and the threatening side of their nature.

In Ireland the forms Cailleach Bhéar(r)a and Cailleach Bhéar(r)ach are the usual ones found in oral tradition. In Scottish tradition the range of oral variants includes Cailleach Bhéara, Cailleach Bheur, Cailleach Bheurr, Cailleach Bheurrach, Cailleach Beartha, Cailleach Bheathrach and it appears that in Scotland, in regard to the transmission of the name at the non-literary level, a degree of folk etymology has come into operation that draws on conceptions of a female nature and wilderness spirit

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owing something to the influence of Norse mythology. The second element of the name in Scotland is often understood — alike by tradition-bearers and by scholarly commentators — to mean 'keen', 'sharp', 'pointed' (< *beur*) or else 'quick-witted', 'sharp-spoken', 'eloquent' (< *beurra(ch)*).

In Irish tradition too, the oral form Cailleach Bhéarrach and the allied(?) form Cailleach Bhiorach suggest the operation here also of an element of folk etymology in regard to the transmission at the non-learned level of the name Cailleach Bhéarra as a term for a female supernatural who is perceived as much as wilderness spirit as sovereignty queen. A detailed analysis of the full range of the forms of the name will prove instructive. I suggest that it may well reveal that a majority of the hags known to popular tradition over Ireland and Scotland who carry a name-form suggestive of identification with the Béarra of the poem should be understood to be named rather from a female personification of the peripheral wilderness whose chief feature is that of being *biorach*, 'sharp', 'shrill', 'inimical'. The form Berach/Beorach was a relatively common personal name in early Ireland and the forms Cailleach Bheurr/Bheurrach are perhaps the most widely encountered form of the name of our Cailleach in the Scottish material. It is surely relevant that the forms 'An Chailleach Bhéarrach', 'leis an gCailligh Bhéarraigh' are the oral forms that occur on the Beara peninsula itself to refer to the 'Old Woman of Beare beside Dursey' and I think it may be argued that, at the level of popular oral tradition, even in Beara itself, the connotations of Cailleach Bhéarrach/Bheurrach are primarily those of the generalized wilderness figure rather than those of the Divine Hag *cum* Sovereignty Queen of learned tradition. George Broderick's suggestion[21] that the Manx traditional song about Berrey Dhone is possible evidence that Bérri was there the hag's original name and not merely a toponym is of the greatest interest and needs to be taken into account in the larger context I am suggesting.

Though there are relatively few instances known to us of the 'political' use of the figure of Cailleach Bhéarra we are, I think, gaining a general understanding today of how the names and

21 G. Broderick, 'Berrey Dhone — A Manx *Caillech Bérri*?' *'Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie,* 40 (1984), 193-210.

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alleged exploits and associations of many eminent figures, lay and clerical, profane, sacred and divine were put to use by the composers, compilers and transcribers of medieval Irish genealogies, origin legends, saints lives, praise poems, and so on. We should also, I believe, allow for the operation of a similar kind of judicious exploitation of traditional lore and the traditional associations of aspects of that lore, in the creative performances of both medieval and modern storytellers at the popular or folk, as distinct from the learned, level of tradition. In particular, in relation to the figure of Cailleach Bhéarra and the associations attaching to her in Irish and Scottish Gaelic tradition, we have, I believe, evidence of skilful manipulation by the modern traditional storyteller operating in non-learned circles, that bears comparison, in its own way, with the manipulation of aspects of *their* common heritage by the learned practitioners of the medieval material. In either case we can perceive, along with the recounting of central motifs associated with traditional figures, the ordering of the material and — presumably — its delivery in the case of the taletellers, after a fashion that gives creative expression to current imaginative tensions and to the contemporary social and cultural *status quo*.

To begin to illustrate this I would first of all propose to examine the text of a story collected by Professor Jackson in the 1930s on the Great Blasket Island, from Peig Sayers, and published by him in the anthology *Scéalta ón mBlascaod.*[22] The story is entitled, presumably by Professor Jackson, 'Ana Ní Áine' and there is no mention in it of the Cailleach Bhéarra as such. Nevertheless I think it is possible to associate this text with category 4 or perhaps with categories 1 and 4 of the seven categories of late, Irish, oral narrative material relating to Cailleach Bhéarra that I outline in Table A.

22 K.H. Jackson, *Scéalta ón mBlascaod,* Dublin 1938, 79-81 = *Béaloideas* 8 (1938), 79-81.

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TABLE A

TENTATIVE CLASSIFICATION OF ORAL IRISH CAILLEACH BHÉARRA NARRATIVE

1. Three hag-goddesses of south-west Munster.
2. Creator and shaper of physical landscape.
3. Cailleach Bhéarra as source of proverbial wisdom.
4. Great age of Cailleach Bhearra is explained and the greatest marvel she witnessed is recounted.
5. Corn goddess: late winter sowing, threshing, reaping contest.
6. Cailleach Bhéarra featuring in Fenian/Romantic tales, e.g. 'Céadach', 'Ridire an Gháire Dhuibh'.
7. Cailleach Bhéarra featuring in international tales, e.g. AT 425, *The Search for the lost Husband,* AT 1525, *The Master Thief.*

This classification derives largely from an examination of material in the Archives of the Department of Irish Folklore UCD (formerly the Irish Folklore Commission) and has a tentative status only in relation to the full range of late Gaelic oral narrative. While Cailleach Bhéarra herself is not named in the Sayers/Jackson tale, its structure and the main import of its plot, suggest very strongly that the heroine Anna Ní Áine alias Áine Nic Chártha, is, in fact, a representation of the divine Earth Mother who is known — under the name Anu — as mother of the gods and who also appears as Áine an Chnuic in later popular legend. Such representative figures frequently occur threefold in Gaelic tradition and indeed legends of south-west Munster present Cailleach Bhéarra as one sister of a mighty trio associated with the three great peninsulas of the south-western Irish coast. The other two sisters, in that case, are called Cailleach Bhólais and Cailleach an Daingin. I am not suggesting that the Ana Ní Áine of the Sayers/Jackson text is 'really', say, Cailleach an Daingin (in the story she is actually located at Kenmare which is in the groin between two of the peninsulas in question) but I am saying that

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what happens in the story appears to be, at one level, a restatement of the central theme expressed a thousand years previously in the 'Lament of the Old Woman of Beare', and that there is some justification for seeing Ana Ní Áine in the twentieth-century text as a version of Cailleach Bhéarra or, more accurately, of the female divine so often given the name Cailleach Bhéarra throughout the Gaelic world.

At another level in the Blasket story social issues pertaining to the world of post-Famine nineteenth- and early twentiety-century rural Ireland are handled and commented on by implication. The way in which the narative structure of the text manages to cope with this duality of signification and brings the story, at both levels, to a highly unified and, culturally, highly meaningful conclusion strikes me as evidence of the continued sophistication, in terms of verbal art, of certain of the twentieth-century successors of the medieval *scelaige* who employed similar skills at both the learned and, we must presume, at the popular levels of tradition.

For the purposes of discussion I present a summary version of the narrative structure of the Sayers/Jackson text and offer five points of commenary that will, hopefully, illustrate my approach to understanding the full cultural significance this text encompasses.

FRAME-TALE SUMMARY

1. Rich man's daughter marries, as mature woman, a young gentleman from Ulster.
2. A travelling man prophesies that she will live on always until a certain monk prepares her for death.
3. She lives on through the generations and is eventually in a cradle rocked by a distant female-line descendent.
4. A new curate of the parish comes to the house and an encounter takes place between him and the female ancient who reveals herself to him for what she is.
5. The curate then reveals that he is the cleric in the prophecy related to the old woman so long before; he questions her regarding the wonders she has seen during her long life.
6. She relates to him the greatest wonder she ever saw; he prepares her for death and she expires.

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7. Her name, we are told, lives on as an epitome of longevity.

INSET-TALE SUMMARY (THE GREATEST WONDER)

1. When the old woman was a young girl she went sailing to Skellig one day in the company of a priest and others.
2. In the dark and chill of sudden storm they encounter a female spirit in a cloud.
3. The priest, having elicited that this is the spirit of a priest's paramour damned for the killing of an infant, reads prayerbook until the woman vanishes in a flash.
4. The boat-party returns home without visiting the Skellig Rock.

COMMENTARY:

1. The tale is opened for us in a setting . . . *'Is dócha gur fadó riamh anis . . .'* ['It is probably a long time ago now'] which is presented as being considerably anterior to the 'present time' of the narration itself. The first character introduced is a man called MacCarthy who is of Kenmare. This man, we are given to understand, is rich and powerful. Peig's audience would have understood, perhaps, that MacCarthy was a strong farmer or even that he was a merchant in the quasi-urban setting of Kenmare town itself. There is in him also, however, an invocation, by association, of the hereditary chiefs, not only of the Kenmare district, but of much of south-west Munster in medieval times; that same MacCarthy that Aodhagán Ó Rathaile invokes so powerfully in his poetry, and locates in the same general place.
2. That MacCarthy's only daughter here remains unmarried until she is a mature woman *(críona cruaigh go math)* establishes the solidity and continuity of the world of the original setting. Into this world is introduced the daughter's husband, a young gentleman *(fear óg uasal)* from Ulster. He is no commoner and he arrives into the tale from a land having, in southern Irish narrative tradition, associations with magic and witchcraft and mysterious powers. His introduction and the incident of the beggar-man with second sight who makes the prophecy, shifts the tale into the realms of the supernatural but without any dramatic rupture of the surface of everyday, ethnographic reality familiar to an early twentieth-century rural Irish Gaeltacht community.

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3. The narrator herself had remarked at the tale's outset that while the heroine's name in 'real life' is Ana Nic Chártha, she is known in this story as Ana Ní Áine (. . . *gur'b ainim di Ana nic Chártha, ach ní tugtar 'sa scéal ach Ana ní Áine).* In fact the narrator goes on to refer to her in the course of the tale as Áine *(tháinig áthas ar Áine)* and as Áine Nic Chártha *(chuir sé an ola dhéanach ar Áine nic Chártha).* The name-form Ana Ní Áine certainly lends itself to notions that considerably deepen the reach of the tale into the cultural past the narrator shares with her audience and a further remark of Máire MacNeill's in *The Festival of Lughnasa* — regarding St Ann — is relevant here: 'Her name has attracted legends of Anu, the mother of the Irish gods, and of Áine, one-time goddess and long-living woman of the Sídhe.'[23]However it is as a surname that Áine is used here in the Blasket text, which is itself unusual. And what are we to make of the first element Ana? Is it a Gaelic form of Ann the mother of the Virgin Mary? The temptation is, for me, to regard it as in some way a version of the old goddess name Anu/Danu and to regard the full style of Ana Ní Áine as the casting into 'modern' form of a reduplicated version of one of the major appellations of the *Magna Mater* in Irish tradition from very early times. We need in no way imply a conscious or co-ordinated knowledge by the Blasket narrator or her Blasket audience of the learned, historical provenance of such a name in order to allow that the name-form Ana Ní Áine could, in late popular tradition, invoke associations in the mind of a native audience for this narrative that touch on the senior female divine whose presence lurks behind the male gods of native tradition from the beginning. The unfolding of the narrative of the tale we are discussing certainly leaves me in no doubt but that we have here a manifestation of the same character about whom the transcriber of the 'Lament of the Old Woman of Beare' had written in an explanatory headnote:

> This is why she was called the Old Woman of Beare: she had fifty foster-children in Beare. She passed into seven periods of youth, so that every husband used to pass to

23 *Op. cit.,* 213.

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> death from her, of old age, so that her gandchildren and great-grandchildren were peoples and races. and for a hundred years she wore the veil, after Cuimíne had blessed it and placed it on her head. Then age and infirmity came to her. . .[24]

4. In the Blasket text it is not Cuimíne Fota, the seventh-century successor of Brendan in the abbacy of Clonfert, who acts the part of the Christian cleric placing on the ancient female the veil of Christian salvation. Instead, appropriately to a text and a narrative repertoire that derives largely from a post-medieval world, it is Seán Bráthair Ó Conchubhair, a monk well known in Irish popular tradition as having been doubly confimed in his Christian priestly character by virtue of having himself, on one occasion, lapsed temporarily into a renunciation of Christian belief through yielding, in Rome, of all places, to the power and meaning of pagan Irish superstition.[25] His appearance in this tale as the medieval *alter ego* of the modern Catholic curate strengthens again the sense of historical depth in the narrative. The female representative of an ancient cosmology is here confronted by a male clerical representative of medieval Christendom through the ministry in 'modern' (or contemporary) times of a clergyman who, in the text, bears the hallmarks of being a Catholic curate of the early twentieth-century Irish rural scene.
5. Just as the figure of Seán Bráthair Ó Conchubhair introduces medieval folklore motifs into the tale, so too the actual encounter and confrontation between Catholic curate and Áine Nic Chártha (which is also the encounter of Seán Bráthair with Ana Ní Áine) is accomplished in terms of the use of the international folklore motifs of *a)* the pursuit and redemption of the priest's paramour, and *b)* the recounting of the greatest marvel witnessed in a preternaturally long life. The former of these motifs is included in the *exempla* given by Caesarius of Heisterbach in his *Dialogus Miraculorum,* compiled about

24 Murphy *op. cit.* (1953), 84.

25 S. Ó Duilearga, ed., *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill,* Baile Átha Cliath 1948, 144-6, 421-2, 469.

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1220AD.[26] In the Blasket text the greatest marvel is recounted by Áine Nic Chártha in what is an inset-tale. The woman in the cloud in this inset-tale is to be seen as a kind of pre-figuration of Áine Nic Chártha herself in her role as the personification of the goddess just as the priest of the inset tale is to be seen as a kind of prefiguration of the Catholic curate who personifies Seán Bráthair Ó Conchubhair. At the centre of both frame- and inset- tales there seems to be an implicit violation of taboo in regard to culturally-proper constraint on the juxtaposition of female sexuality/fertility with male clerical status. In the inset-tale the violation takes the form of infanticide following on illicit relations between the woman in the cloud and an unnamed cleric. In the frame-tale the potential of some similar type violation is hinted at in the scene where the Catholic curate innocently lays his hand to the cradle, in the kitchen corner, to rock the supposed infant. In doing this the curate causes the historical and mythological ground to open under his feet, so to speak, and brings about the revelation of their true identities on the part of the protagonists. Following this he is able to lead Ana out of an eternity of existence in this world and into the eternity of the Christian afterlife in heaven, thus, after a fashion, affirming again the sovereign triumph of Christianity over Celtic religion. In Irish tradition legitimate sovereignty has always had its source in the otherworld and the conferring of this sovereignty has frequently involved an encounter in which marvels are witnessed. We need not then be surprised when the sovereignty of Christianity and its male deity as represented in the Blasket story by Seán Bráthair Ó Conchubhair continues to be asserted in the context of a recounting of the greatest marvel witnessed in the long life of the representative of the supreme female divinity of the Celtic world in Ireland.

In Table B I show the triple opposition in terms of which the tale's central motif is rendered:

26. *Caesarius of Heisterbach Dialogus Miraculorum,* ed. J. Strange, Coblenz 1850, Dist. xii, cap. 20, trans., H. von E. Scott and C.C.S. Bland, *The Dialogue on Miracles 1220-1235,* I-II, London 1929.

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TABLE B

FEMALE 'CELTIC' DIVINITY	MALE 'CHRISTIAN' DIVINITY
Cailleach Bhéarra	Christus
Ana Ní Áine	Seán Bráthair Ó Conchubhair
Áine Nic Chártha	Catholic curate/ *sagart óg*

The vitality of cultural continuity in this Blasket text is, I think, clear, and is not, in general terms, in dispute in relation to oral narrative tradition. What it is equally important for us to try and understand as clearly as we can is how this traditional material is — in performance and transmission — adapted and shaped in relation to contemporary social and cultural circumstances, so that the embodiment of its chief cultural meaning is brought about in an historically and socioeconomically realistic fashion from the point of view of the contemporary audience for its narration. It is by means of some such constant adaptation that the functional relevance to society of traditional material is maintained and the means by which such adaptation is achieved has to be the creativity of narrative performance. This creativity can be thought of as a function of both the talent and the personality of the narrative performer responding to the expectations and pressures deriving from the social context of the particular narrative event; an event whose reality as a form of social communication is always poorly represented by even the most meticulously transcribed text. In relation to Cailleach Bhéarra in Irish oral narrative tradition however, texts are almost the only record of the spontaneous storytelling, featuring her, that we can study. Careful examination, classification and analysis of such texts can still be expected, I think, to yield certain clues as to the nature and operation of functional adaptation in the traditional creative performance of the material.

Creativity of performance seems to me to find expression on

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sociological and psychological levels as well as on that level of rhetoric and verbal artistry where the narrator's sophistication in the use of language and the exploitation of linguistic resources (including semantic ones) finds expression. Geoffrey Gantz has remarked, in relation to the linguistic and other sophistication of learned, medieval Irish tales, that they encompass, as he puts it, 'both impacted myth and corrupted history'.[27] I think a case can be made for adding to this list, in respect of the later folk narratives, both a kind a stylized sociology and also a dimension in which the personality of the narrator expresses itself on the particular occasion of performance in response to factors that even the fullest and most exhaustive ethnography of the tale-telling situation cannot hope to register. I should like to pursue a little the question of the addition of a stylized sociology since, in relation to the psychological dimension I am proposing, almost nothing can at present be said — at least by me — at a level other than the subjective and the anecdotal.

In Professor Jackson's Blasket text the age-old characters and the culturally profound significance of their encounter are presented to us in a setting that is, on the surface, that of post-famine rural Ireland. The detail of the story, in both the frame and the inset tales, has been meticulously chosen by the skilled narrator so as to be immediately comprehensible to a contemporary audience in terms of their own personal life-experience. The profounder meanings of the narrative communicate themselves at several deeper levels. We cannot hope to understand or even illustrate this process of surface renewal from a single text or even from all known versions of a single tale or legend.

Ideally, what is needed is a complete ethnographic and textual record of the entire community's engagement in the creative performance of its oral narrative repertoire over as long a period as feasible. Such a record would enable one to attempt to identify and analyse the social substance in which traditional incidents and characters are clothed. Another approach might be to take all known versions of legends relating to a single traditional personage such as Cailleach Bhéarra and to attempt to analyse

27 J. Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Harmondsworth 1981, 23.

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their sociological or ethnographic embodiment in terms of regional socio-economic and historical variation. In an effort to begin to do this latter I have extracted from the archival material in the Department of Irish Folklore texts relating to Cailleach Bhéarra that I have tenatively assigned to the seven categories of oral narrative already outlined in Table A, and I would suggest that it is possible to see in this material evidence of at least some aspects of the sociological and ethnographic embodiment of traditional characters and incidents in late Gaelic oral narrative tradition. We might take, for example, the material designated by category 5 or, rather, that section of it relating to the harvesting contest between Cailleach Bhéarra and a succession of human figures one of whom eventually vanquishes her. Category 5 material in general shows Cailleach Bhéarra as very definitely a Corn-Goddess and consists of versions of three main incidents:-

a) How people tricked her into revealing to them the secret of her early and abundant corn harvest; she lets it be known that she sows in late winter and harvests the still-green corn before the coming of autumn gales. *Coirce na bhFaoillí* is attested in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic tradition as a name for this late winter corn.[28]
b) How she taught people to thresh corn in an improved manner using a hazel and holly flail and threshing one sheaf at a time on a clean floor. The account typically ends with a *leath-rann* of which the following is an example:
Suaisteán cuilinn agus buailteán coll
Fasaire aon phunainn ar urlár lom
c) How she lorded it at harvest time over the reaping of corn and put to death a succession of male reapers whose legs she used to sweep from them in the cornfield when they failed to match her own prowess with sickle or scythe.

At least twenty-eight versions of c) exist — all from Connaught and one of them, the longest, is seemingly, a retelling of the version Hyde published in 1901.[29] These twenty-eight versions

28 R.I. Black, 'The Gaelic Calendar Months: Some Meanings and Derivations', *Shadow* 2 (1985), 3-13.
29 de hÍde, *loc. cit.*

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vary considerably as to length and to the narrative skill of those who told them to the Folklore Commission field-workers. The question has to be considered of what effect Hyde's publication of his text of this tale in 1901 had on the repertoire of the West of Ireland communities from which the Folklore Commission received more than two dozen versions a generation later. From a combination of both internal and contextual evidence it may be assumed that the Hyde text is not the sole source of all the later versions though it has, doubtless, influenced some of them. The specific nature and precise extent of this influence remain, for the present, as an interesting topic to be investigated. The versions also vary in the degree to which the traditional material is clothed in the early twentieth-century rural reality which was the ethnographic context in which, as tales, they functioned.

The biggest single adaptation, found in a majority of the texts, is that it is a mowing contest, rather than a reaping contest in which the Hag is finally vanquished after her long reign of terror and destruction. I would tentatively interpret this as an adaptation arising from the far greater familiarity of the generality of the plain people of the West of Ireland communities from which the Irish Folklore Commission field workers collected, with the saving of hay rather than of corn on any large scale in recent times.[30] Whether the distribution of those versions where it is still a reaping contest could be correlated with areas of a greater familiarity with grain cropping than is generally to be found throughout the essentially spade-culture territory of much of the Western Gaeltacht in the early twentieth century is difficult to ascertain. Clearly, however, running through all these versions is the notion of Cailleach Bheár(r)a/Bhéar(r)ach, thus named, as one of the gentry — or at least one of the strong farmer class — living in the local Big House on occasion, or, alternatively, on a substantial holding, hiring farm labourers, working them hard and feeding and sleeping them as would any nineteenth-century squire or minor landlord. She is portrayed as being concerned with rents and wages and land purchase and the main events of the tale are always fleshed out with these concerns and with other

30 T. Jones-Hughes, 'The Large Farm in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', in A. Gailey *et. al.* eds., *Gold Under the Furze*, Dublin [1982].

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realistic details from the humbler lives of the tales' audiences: turfcutting, buttermaking, knitting, walking to the market in Galway, even emigrating for a while to England. The setting here is, in some ways, reminiscent of Cois Fharraige in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's short stories. In other ways it reflects the sheep country of Clare-Galway and east Galway with its meadows and grazing lands behind straight stone walls, its comfortable farmhouses and relatively more developed economy and social organization.

Against these backgrounds of contemporary ethnography the central confrontation takes place that pits the strength and cunning of the human hero against the prowess of a supernatural female who is vanquished at last by means of human deviousness assisted by an element of magic advantage that is provided as often as not by a blacksmith or his daughter. The version Hyde published has a triple confrontation in terms of, firstly, spade work, then the mowing of hay and, finally, the reaping of oats as Table C sets out.

TABLE C

CONTEST	IMPLEMENT	ADVANTAGE FROM CB's DAUGHTER
digging of stubble	spade	hound's milk
mowing of hay	scythe	steel spikes
reaping of oats	sickle	destruction of *Dardaol*

In this version it is Cailleach Bhéarra's own daughter (fathered by a blacksmith?) who provides the advice and magical advantage to the human hero Donnchadh Mór Mac Mánais.

There follows a summary version of the narrative structure of the Hyde text.

FRAME-TALE SUMMARY

1. Cailleach Bhéarach and her daughter set up farming in Gleann na Madadh.

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2. A succession of labourers expire in her service in vain attempts to match her prowess.
3. The warrior-like Donnchadh Mór boasts that he will overcome her and takes service with her for unusually high stakes. He is to be fed on a cereal diet along with one pig-meat dish on Easter Day.
4. Donnchadh wins affection of Cailleach Bhéarach's daughter but is left prostrate at the end of a day's spade-work.
5. Daughter renders superhuman strength to Donnchadh by dipping his bread in milk of her mother's hound. Donnchadh vanquishes Cailleach Bhéarach and is rescued from her wrath by daughter.
6. Before haymaking, daughter supplies Donnchadh with steel spikes with which he can cause Cailleach Bhéarach to blunt her scythe, thus himself gaining victory a second time.
7. Before reaping of oats, daughter alerts Donnchadh to existence of magic beetle in handle of Cailleach Bhéarach's sickle. Donnchadh destroys the beetle and inflicts ultimate defeat on Cailleach Bhéarach.
8. At his request she reveals her great age and she relates go him the story of her life and binds him to secrecy regarding it while she lives.
9. At the end of his term of service Donnchadh extracts the fullest reward for his contract.
10. Shortly after, Cailleach Bhéarach sickens and dies during a great storm together with her daughter and her hound.

INSET-TALE SUMMARY (The story of the Cailleach's life)

1. When the Cailleach Bhéarach was a young girl she was betrayed in love by a neighbour's son.
2. In revenge she acquired magic gifts from the smith and used them to kill her former lover.
3. She gives birth to a daughter at the smith's house and, in disguise as man, becomes his helper at the forge.
4. As punishment for accidentally injuring the smith she is transformed into a sow for a period of one hundred years.
5. Subsequently she is restored to her daughter and given riches with which she buys her farm at Gleann na Madadh.

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COMMENTARY

1. Donnchadh Mór is presented to us as a type of the male hero: he is as strong as any stallion and as fleet of foot as any stag. There is no fair or assembly that he will not clear with his ash-plant when anger comes over him. He is set up as a fitting adversary for the *cailleach draoidheachta* ['magic hag'] as Cailleach Bhéarach is described in the text as if the supernatural elements of her *persona* were likely to be overlooked in the mundane ethnographic setting of her farming activities.
2. Donnchadh, the supreme type of the male has relationship in the text with three females who can be aligned with those aspects of the female supernatural that I have suggested are prominent in the totality of Cailleach Bhéarra tradition:
   a) his own mother, elderly, venerable, wise from whom he has himself sprung and been nourished and who can fathom the wiles of Cailleach Bhéarach. She stands in the relationship to him of *Magna Mater*.
   b) Cailleach Bhéarach, who is primarily a nature and wilderness goddess here, inimical guardian of the fertility of the vegetable world (as in so many other texts of the animal kingdom too.) She stands in the relationship to the hero of the Divine Hag of War and Death.
   c) the daughter of Cailleach Bhéarach who accepts and returns the hero's love and, in this role of pseudo-spouse, sustains and equips and enlightens him in his confrontations with his adversary (her mother). She stands in the relationship to the hero of (semi) divine consort or Sovereignty Queen and is possessed of at least some of the traditionally associated motifs[31] e.g., — she is loathly — *Bhi gnúis uirthi chomh gránna leis an mbás* ['Her countenance was as horrible as death'] — she supplies a draught of magic liquid that confers sovereignty/physical endurance etc.
3. The sustaining, nourishing, enhancing relationship between Donnchadh and the Cailleach Bhéarach's daughter is reflected

31 R.A. Breatnach, 'The Lady and the King: a theme of Irish literature'. *Studies* 43 (1953), 321-36.

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in the endearment term *A chuisle mo chroí* which is used towards Donnchadh by his mother and which he himself uses to his pseudo-spouse when she provides for him in his confrontation with her mother. Correspondingly, terms exchanged between Donnchadh and the Cailleach Bhéarach express the opposite of endearment:- *'Níor thug mé tosach d'aon fhear ariamh, agus níl tusa dul d'á fhaghail uaim' ar sise.* ['"I never gave precedence to any man and you are not going to get it from me now", said she'.]

'Faobhar, a Dhonnchaidh, le faobhar gearrtar féar.' 'Ní headh, a chailleach', ar seisean, 'acht le fear maith agus le sean-speil gheár.' ['"Edge Donnchadh, hay is cut by edge." "Not so, hag," said he, "but by a good man and a sharp old scythe."']

'Ha, Ha, a chailleach bhradach, tá tú gabhtha anois...' ['"Ho, ho, you thieving hag, you are caught now."']

4. In the inset tale we get an autobiographical account of the earlier life of Cailleach Bhéarach which incorporates the motifs of homicidal violence and illicit sexual relations in a manner that appears to echo the violations detailed in the inset tale of the Sayers/Jackson text discussed earlier. In the latter, however, it is the issue of the illicit relationship between woman and priest who is murdered whereas in the Hyde text the killing has occurred prior to what I take to be the fathering of the Cailleach's daughter by the smith/magician.
5. Just as the Jackson text ends with an explanation — in terms of the story recounted — of a piece of local linguistic usage, i.e. *Tá sí có críona le hÁna Ní Áine* ['She is as old as Ana Ní Áine'], so the Hyde text ends with an explanation in terms of its own story of the placename Gleann na Madadh ['The glen of the dogs']: we are told that hundreds of dogs congregated in the district on the morning following the death of Cailleach Bhéarach, her daughter and hound. In this way, in the case of both texts, the narrator provides an innocent and superficial explanation for the existence of the legend in his/her repertoire. We can easily see, however, how a strong case can be made for understanding that the significance of such texts for their traditional audiences would have included mythological and religious considerations having an impressive continuity from earlier ages.

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I would set this Hyde text along with that text collected from Peig Sayers by Professor Jackson which I have commented on earlier and see them both as impressive examples of what the later Gaelic taletellers at the popular levels of tradition in Ireland could make of the material they inherited from a long past. These two published texts along with many others as yet in archival form in Ireland and Scotland, deserve in some ways to be regarded as works of literature, certainly as artistic products in their own right. Their creativity, however, and the artistic meanings they carry — and here I may be allowed to hazard a final assertion — are never to be regarded as primarily a matter of some literary aesthetic or some transcendent, inspirational vision. Rather is it the case — both for the tales' immediate audiences and for our later scholarship on them — that their creativity and significance as art must be estimated in terms of their sophisticated exploitation of the repertoire of association and nuance that belongs to a universe of discourse rooted in a communal social and cultural reality. An important part of this reality was communal knowledge of history and ancestral tradition, and Cailleach Bhéarra material in that popular ancestral tradition in Ireland and Scotland constitutes, I believe, one kind of evidence for my assertion.

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